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Pre-Game Analysis: The iPhone vs. Real Smartphones

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By [Jamie Lendino](#)

The [Apple iPhone](#) is almost here. By parsing the available press materials, information gleaned from demos, Steve Jobs' own words, the commercials, and other Apple Web site information, we can deduce an awful lot about the iPhone today—even before we get our grubby product-reviewer hands on one.

I've broken down the iPhone's features into ten main facets. In each case, I'll analyze Apple's latest darling will and won't be able to do, how it compares to top smartphone contenders in each category, and what questions remain unanswered in the final week before its June 29th release date.

Note that this comparison is directed at the smartphone market. It's increasingly unlikely that the iPhone will ever be a true smartphone, despite [Jobsian rants](#) about [built-in Safari](#) as an open platform to the contrary. But in terms of sheer ability, the iPhone comes closest to today's smartphones running Palm OS, Windows Mobile, Symbian S60, and BlackBerry OS—even if you can't add applications to it in the traditional sense.

1. E-mail

The iPhone will support IMAP and POP out of the box. Since it includes built-in Yahoo! and Google search, plus .Mac support, there's a good chance you can hook into those Web-based accounts with push e-mail as well. The iPhone's slick e-mail client also supports HTML messages, including in-line graphics and photos.

However, there's a complete lack of enterprise choices, such as BlackBerry Connect, Microsoft Exchange, and [Good Mobile Messaging](#). If you're tethered to your business e-mail system, you'll have to either sweat it out with your company's cheesy Web mail client (presuming it's Safari-compatible), or bite the bullet and go (or stay with) BlackBerry or Windows Mobile. Plus, the iPhone's on-screen keyboard looks like it's going to be more trouble than it's worth, which not only inhibits e-mail, but instant messaging and SMS texting as well.

2. Music player

Despite its pedigree, the iPhone will act differently than an iPod when playing music. The iPhone has no Click Wheel; it has a screen that's one-inch *larger* than any iPod released to date; and it's possible you can't use regular stereo earbuds with it, since you also need a built-in mic for [phone calls](#). Rather than using a wheel, the iPhone's interface lets you browse track listings or even album covers with finger touches, similar to what iTunes 7 and a mouse offer on the desktop today. Other niceties: the iPhone will also display album art more prominently, it should work with Bluetooth stereo without a clumsy iPod adapter, and it will work with all tracks purchased in the iTunes Store.

Essentially, it will blow away anything available on smartphones for playing music, including the excellent [Pocket Tunes 4](#) for Palm OS Treos, and Windows Media Player on Microsoft-based handsets. Music freaks with hard-drive-based iPods may be left wanting more storage space. But for everyone else, the iPhone could be the only iPod they'll ever need.

3. Web browser

Right out of the gate, the iPhone takes the lead with its ultra-sharp 320x480-pixel screen and touch-based browsing interface. It's shaping up to be the first phone that lets you read actual Web pages without straining your brain. At the same time, the iPhone's slow EDGE data connection means you'll only achieve reasonable speeds when joining a WiFi network, just like with the Nokia E61i, which also packs a great Web browser, even though its screen resolution falls far short at 320x240. [Opera Mobile](#)-equipped Windows Mobile [phones](#) also do a nice job, but Opera Mobile is a \$24.95 addition (though there's a free beta of 8.65 that expires October 1st), and you'll still find yourself browsing WAP sites instead of real ones most of the time.

This is one category we'll have to wait for a full review to really get a sense of it. But we're betting that it will be easier to dial numbers on the iPhone with your fingers than it is on the notoriously-picky Windows Mobile 6 Professional interface, which really requires an equally-picky stylus. The iPhone supports all the usual voice features, such as voice dialing, a comprehensive address book with desktop syncing ability, and even a visual look at your voice mail messages, something that requires extra software with other smartphones.

But we're still in the dark about the iPhone's call quality, reception, comfort, speakerphone, and battery life. (Apple just reported 8 hours of talk time, but they've been rather optimistic in the past about these things.) Contrary to what was available just a few years ago, many smartphones today – including the Motorola Q, BlackBerry Pearl, T-Mobile Dash, and Palm Treo 755p – make excellent voice calls. And while the Q offers middling battery life at best, the other three excel at endurance.

5. Portability

No qualms here; the iPhone is a beauty, looking like a liquefied iPod in a form factor that's as slim as they come. Today, the Samsung BlackJack, the Motorola Q, and the non-QWERTY BlackBerry Pearl are three of the smallest smartphones available, and the iPhone is roughly equivalent in size to all of them. At 4.8 ounces, the iPhone's weight isn't a problem either. While some may balk at the iPhone's maximum storage of 8 GB, iPhone buyers can take comfort in the fact that their flash-memory-based handsets have no moving parts, won't skip, and will likely last longer as a result. —next: 6-10 >

6. Data speeds

Here's where a lot of the early iPhone frustration resides. Apple angered a lot of people by signing an exclusive five-year deal with AT&T. This could have been acceptable, given that AT&T is finally building out their high-speed HSDPA network. But the iPhone doesn't support that protocol either; instead, it's a pokey EDGE device. On the plus side, the iPhone has WiFi. In fact, it shares its EDGE/WiFi mix with the T-Mobile Dash and Wing, and the unlocked Nokia E61i. If you're in a hot spot, expect data speeds to soar, making quick work of complicated Web pages. If you're using EDGE, well, there may be enough time at the coffee shop for an extra cup.

Another unknown is the ability to tether the iPhone for use as a laptop modem. Here it is of limited use, though. EDGE speeds max out at about triple that of dial-up, or much slower than even the lowest of DSL connections. In short, EDGE doesn't come close to AT&T's HSDPA, Verizon's EV-DO, or Sprint's EV-DO data networks in terms of sheer speed. The iPhone's size shouldn't be the reason; the BlackJack and Q are both 0.45 inches thick, virtually identical to the iPhone's 0.46 measurement, and yet both those devices offer 3G data network support.

7. Extensibility

It's rare that Steve Jobs provokes a strong negative reaction from his speeches, but he came close to doing so at this year's WWDC 2007 conference. Developing AJAX applications within the Safari environment, while minimally useful, is nothing like the open platform and SDK everyone was hoping for.

As a result, we won't get much more than little gadgets that can hook into the iPhone's address book. Let's be clear: this is a huge wasted opportunity, given that the iPhone is essentially a small Mac running OS X, and it's the single biggest reason why the title of this article is "iPhone vs. the Real Smartphones." All four smartphone operating systems have thousands of aftermarket applications available, with more hitting the market every single day. And despite what Jobs said, most smartphones don't crash every 15 minutes, even when using third-party apps.

8. Video and TV

The iPhone offers some killer video viewing options, such as the ability to purchase downloadable TV shows and movies from the iTunes Store. Of course, you'll need to do it from your PC and then transfer the media over to the iPhone, but that's true for music as well. And the iPhone's 3.5-inch, high-resolution screen renders dedicated portable media players like the Archos 604 almost irrelevant.

What the iPhone does lack is a true live TV solution. There's no way to "turn on CNN" or MTV from Apple's latest gadget. This is something you can get on a lot of smartphones, but even the best of those don't offer true broadcast television. In all cases, you'll have to settle for a streamed Internet feed, providing the handset supports 3G data networks. That's better than nothing, but pretty poor compared to TV tuner-equipped phones like the LG VX9400.

The perennial mobile office suite favorite, DataViz Documents To Go, is available on all major smartphone platforms now, though some versions (BlackBerry OS, Windows Mobile 6 Standard) are more limited than others. In this regard, the iPhone disappoints so far, since we haven't heard zip about whether or not the iPhone can even view Microsoft Office documents, much less edit them or save changes. There's nothing on Apple's Web site, aside from a vague reference to note taking; that usually means a text editor, not a word processor. The on-screen keyboard's apparent "oddness" (for lack of a better term) probably won't do it many favors in this department either.

10. Widgets

The iPhone runs away with the prize here; you can tell just by the photos. It looks like the home screen will give you quick access to just about anything you'd want at a glance, including news, weather, sports scores, E-mail, the Web, and the usual address book and calendar. HTC came close with the Touch, but the illusion falls apart the moment you start using the thing. Palm OS has always been alright with this, particularly if you strap on a subscription-based information aggregator such as Handmark Pocket Express. Even the various mobile portals - MSN Live Search, or Google's WAP page - do much of this in a pinch. But our money is on the iPhone widgets blowing them all away in looks, ease of access, and overall usefulness. We'll see if we're right on June 29th.

So there you have it. The iPhone occupies a unique place in the wireless market, straddling the line between smartphones, feature phones, and portable media players. In some cases, it exceeds the capabilities of all of these devices, while it lags behind in others. Will Apple's magic combination of killer design, features, and a revolutionary touch interface be enough to match its enormous hype? We're only a week away from finding out.

Jamie Lendino is the editor of Smart Device Central.